The DARVO Dilemma

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DARVO is a term developed by a clinical psychologist working with child abuse at the University of Oregon. In my work, I've discerned this process occurring in other situations including workplace mobbing and bullying. Indeed, it is something for both Human Resources and Risk Management professionals to consider when investigating workplace issues.

DARVO is an acronym for Deny, Accuse, Reverse Victim and Offender. In the workplace, DARVO can appear as a result of factionalism during which opposing groups accuse each other of misconduct. It also can be used as a defense by a mobber or a bully when confronted by someone who speaks up, sometimes inappropriately or as an outburst. This person may be the target or an observer who is frustrated by what they see. The intent is to redirect the attention from the mobber to someone else and to play the victim while setting others against the target. The resulting confusion supports the mobbing process and further victimizes the target. Mobbing is engineered to make the target appear to be responsible for what is happening and attempts to legitimize the emotional abuse.

Analyzing a situation regardless of whether DARVO is in play takes time. The history both of the work area and staff should be examined. Being cognizant of day to day behavior on the part of all players is not always possible but taking time to monitor interactions beyond documented issues is important. There can be a tendency to try to make one person completely wrong and one or more others completely right. It is important to understand that some of the consequences of a successful mobbing are anarchy and a sense of arrogance on the part of the mobber and those caught up in the process. These can carry over and set the stage for more of the same regardless of the outcome of the current issue. Following is a Case Overview of a retail workplace in which mobbing including DARVO is currently occurring.

Phase One - The initial conflict concerned a highly competitive coworker on the supervisory level (Supervisor 1) who would swoop in and intercept customers from others like a linebacker intercepting a football. Staff expressed frustration to the manager, who then worked with staff and the other supervisor (Supervisor 2) as well as the offending coworker to foster a sense of teamwork rather than competition. The rumblings and dissatisfaction were not rampant but Supervisor 2 was unhappy with the way the situation was being handled.

Phase Two – Enter the mobber, a new hire, experienced, previously known to the manager and Supervisor 1. The mobber begins making jokes about Supervisor 1, embarrassing her in front of customers then laughing good naturedly, and begins befriending Supervisor 2 who is happy to have an ally. The mobber is funny and outspoken, does excellent work and is well accepted by other staff, the majority of whom begin distancing themselves from Supervisor 1. A staff member who is not participating in the gossip confronts the mobber on another issue and is accused by the mobber of bullying.

Phase Three – Management Involvement. Initially, the mobber gained the manager's confidence and shared her observations of Supervisor 1 in another workplace which initially influenced the manager to some extent. While recognizing that the target, Supervisor 1, had issues to be corrected, the manager, familiar with the mobbing process and intercept guidelines, began watching interactions and behaviors and became more aware of the dynamics transpiring as a result of the influence of the mobber.

Moreover, the bottom line has begun to be impacted by the continuing drama. This workplace has not moved beyond Phase Three of the mobbing process and hopefully it will not go any further.

In this case as in many other workplaces, there are situations created by personalities, work styles, changes in leadership or other forms of conflict that cause some instability. These can be capitalized upon by someone with an agenda. In this case, there are a number of possible reasons for the mobber to have set upon the supervisor. One strong possibility is that the mobber wants Supervisor 1's job. Another might simply be that the mobber is competitive and also wants to be the best and sees Supervisor 1 as a threat or competition to be eliminated or at least intimidated enough to lower the competitor's performance.

Regardless of the motivation or persons involved, all mobbing and bullying situations require more than a cursory look or simply reviewing documentation. Observing dynamics and behaviors, history of the work environment and other factors, including the possibility of DARVO are necessary to ensure effective intercept and outcomes that will prevent future occurrences.

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